

The Black Box

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OPPENHEIM

CHAPTER XV.
(Continued.)

QUEST studied the message for a moment.

"Ready?" the latter replied, tartly.

"You must forgive me if I cannot follow the complications of your—pardon me for saying Munchausenlike affairs. How does the arrest of these two men help you?"

"Don't you see?" Quest explained.

"These are the two thugs who set upon me up at the section house. They killed the signal man, who could have been my alibi, and swiped my car, in which, as it cannot be found, French supposes that I returned to New York. With their arrest the case against me collapses. I tell you frankly, professor," Quest continued frowning, "I hate to leave the city without having found that girl; but I am not sure that the quickest way to get things right would not be to go down, arrest these men and bring them back here, clear myself and then go to the north and nail for Craig."

"I agree with you most heartily," the professor declared. "I recommend any course which will insure the return of my man Craig!"

"I cannot promise you that you will ever have Craig here again," Quest observed grimly. "I rather fancy Sing Sing will be his next home."

"Don't be foolish, Mr. Quest," the professor advised. "Don't let me lose confidence in you. Craig would not hurt a fly, and as to abducting your assistant—if my sense of humor were developed upon normal lines—well, I should laugh! What you have really done, you, and that young lady assistant of yours, is to terrify the poor fellow into such a state of nerves that he scarcely knows what he is doing. As a matter of fact, how do you know that the young woman has been abducted at all? Such things are most unlikely, especially in this part of the city."

"What reason do you suggest, then, for her disappearance?" Quest inquired.

"At my age," the professor replied, "I naturally know nothing of these things. But she is a young woman of considerable personal attractions—I should think it not unlikely that she is engaged in some amorous adventure."

Quest laughed derisively.

"You do not know Lenora, Mr. Ashleigh," he remarked. "However, if it interests you, I will tell you why I know she has been abducted. Only a few hours ago I was talking to her."

The professor turned his head swiftly towards Quest. There was a queer sort of surprise in his face.

"Talking to her?"

Quest nodded.

"Our pocket wireless!" he explained. "Lenora has even described to me the room in which she is hidden."

"And the neighborhood also?" the professor demanded.

"Of that she knows nothing," Quest replied. "She is in a room apparently at the top of a house and the only window is in the roof. She can see nothing, hear nothing. When I get hold of the man who put her there," Quest continued slowly, "it will be my ambition to supplement personally any punishment the law may be able to inflict."

The professor's manner had lost all its petulance. He looked at Quest almost with admiration.

"That idea of yours is wonderful," he confessed. "I am beginning to believe that on this occasion, at any rate, you will triumph over your enemies."

Quest rose to his feet.

"Well," he said, "if I can keep out of my friend French's way for a few hours longer I think I can promise you that I shall be a free man when I return from Bethel. I'm off now, professor. Wish me luck!"

"My friend," the professor replied, "I wish you the best of luck, but more than anything else in the world," he added, a little peevishly, "I hope you may bring me back my servant Craig, and leave us both in peace."

Quest stepped off the cars at Bethel a little before noon that morning. The sheriff met him at the depot and greeted him cordially but with obvious surprise.

"Say, Mr. Quest," he exclaimed, as they turned away, "I know these men are wanted on your charge, but I thought—you for saying so—that you were in some trouble yourself."

Quest nodded.

"I'm out of that—come out yesterday."

"Very glad to hear it," the sheriff assured him heartily. "I never thought that they'd be able to hold you."

"They hadn't a chance," Quest admitted.

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